

Iñaki Uria - Interview

Iñaki Uria, managing director of Egunkaria, is still imprisoned at Aranjuez (near Madrid) penitentiary. He has written to answer our questions, narrating his experience since the Spanish paramilitary police, the Civil Guard, took him from his home in Zarautz, on February the 20th.

from **Egunero**

Can you tell us about the arrest?

I was alone, sleeping, when at about 01:15 in the night I heard the bell ringing and someone banging my front door. I opened the door myself. It was the Civil Guard. They searched the house and handcuffed me —arms on the back. They took me blindfolded to the editing office of Egunkaria's. Then I was taken to the HQ of the Civil Guard in Donostia-San Sebastian and afterwards to Madrid. The questioning started on the way to Madrid and was conducted in a civilised manner. They try to make you feel comfortable, even when you are handcuffed and blindfolded. It was surreal, as if we were just friends going to the cinema. The questioning had no end. They check your personality in those four or five hours, what your reactions are like..., they write everything down.

How were you treated at the police station in Madrid?

It was terribly cold as they took me to the cell. They took my jacket away, and left me just my t-shirt and shirt on. I had only one blanket. Cold, I was freezing, I could not sleep... What a noise they made, beating noises. They made a horrible roar in the interrogation cells. It is always the same game: The nice policeman and the tough one, price or punishment: "It is your choice". They try to scare you. They force you to take off all your clothes, on that cold. They force you to do physical exercise □ 'till your body collapses. The only way to get a rest is to talk. I was exhausted by the second round of exercise. My breast ached, and they caused an injury in my big toe, that has not healed yet.

Did they try to suffocate you with a plastic bag?

Yes. After doing that with the plastic bag, they put a gun against my head and pulled the trigger. On another round they aimed at me with some infra-red instrument, in the dark of the punishment cell. They played with a stick around my anus as if they were going to put it in... They threatened me with electroshocks... They told me Martin Ugalde was dead (I cried like a baby)... They beat me with a closed newspaper, they had me dragging on the mud... You are nothing but a puppet on the hands of the monster. But the monster cannot get into your mind.

If they treated us like that, I am scared even to think about what they did to Joseba Arregi, Gurutze Iantzi (the first a young Basque man and the second a woman who died after been interrogated by the Spanish Police) and to "Unai Romano": http://www.geocities.com/basquecampaign/torture/bc_unai.htm.

The hardest of it all happened when a colleague in the cell next door started banging his head against the wall. In that moment I did not know who he was, but I heard how bravely he faced the policemen: He shouted "Leave me alone" and "take me to the judge".

What about the declaration before the judge?

I spent a whole night in the cells of the Spanish National Court, alone, freezing. When they finally took me before judge Del Olmo, prosecutor Olga Sanchez, and the lawyer appointed for me by the court, at 8:00 in the morning, I could not either keep awake nor asleep. All the questions were based on the following presumption: pro Basque independence armed group ETA directs journal Egunkaria. ETA appointed the director, and it finances the paper. I would have told them ETA has never

appointed anybody in Egunkaria, neither given money to the paper. Many enterprising Basque citizens have put it forward, with our toil and our money. I would have talked long about that with a judge respecting the presumption of innocence. But with one that has punished me on advance, and closed Egunkaria, what should I have talked about? I chose not to answer any question. Finally, I told them that Egunkaria was a small journal, but a very good one, a very open one.

Then you were sent to prison.

After been six days in the monster's fangs, prison is heaven. Oleaga, Torrealdai, Auzmendi, Goia, Otamendi, Gomila, Lazkano...what a look we all had on our faces. And Zubiria? We asked each other about him; we were very worried.

Two days later I was taken to a prison department where other seven Basques are. They were nice young people always learning, working at the workshops, or doing some sport. We are all ETA members here, that is what jail watchers write after our names, even if not even one of us has been tried.

Why did they close Egunkaria?

After being taken to the judge, I met a Swiss, an Italian, a Romanian and a Spaniard in the interrogation cells. The Swiss and the Italian asked me about what Basque people want. I answered them: "Just to be same that Italy and Switzerland are in Europe. While states exist, we want a state. To have a voice in Brussels, without going though Madrid or Paris". They told me that was impossible. "If you get that, Galicians, Catalans and Andalucians too are going to demand it...And will happen to Spain?". The swiss man explained to me that Switzerland is a confederation where different languages are spoken and all are accepted. "That's fine, but have all of them decided about that by themselves?", I told him. I think that's the real problem. Why can't Basques decide about their present or their future? Just because two democracies like France and Spain don't accept it. They can see that the support for the Basque language and the patriotism is going forward, even if it is struggling to do so. They say they love the Basque language, but they keep that love for the museums or for the kitchens...They don't want Basque language to be used on TV or in the press; neither in the discos nor at university. In other words, they don't want Basque language in in the modern world. Basque language differentiates us, and they can't accept that.

Egunkaria is a necessary tool to make Basque language a normal language, and to contribute to the identity of the Basque speaking community. Basque national project is build on that identity, our culture, our history, the integrity of the Basque Country and so forth. It is not a mere proclamation, it is the reality. We the Basque people live in that Basque Country, but they don't want that to happen. Spanish magistrates know that ETA has never been in command of Egunkaria; that ETA has never put any money in Egunkaria...But they couldn't care less; if they can destroy it with minor costs, what is going to stop them?

What do you feel about the Basque people's answer to the closure?

It was amazing to know about the huge demonstration in Donostia (San Sebastian) and to see the pictures. A whole world for Egunkaria (Egunero's headline next day). During two days, the Basque Country boiled with Egunkaria. I didn't expect as much in such a short time. After reading the first issues of Egunero, I have to say that Egunkaria's workers don't have deceived me. You expect people to react, but I was so happy and proud when I took Egunero in my hands!

I agree with Egunero's main message: it is time for compromise. We should not allow this warmness to cool down. Basque media need strong pilars, and for that is necessary to have money, readers, buyers, stake holders, promoters...This is my message to all the readers, the announcers and stake holders too: We've got the best of the working teams! It is worth to trust on them.

What should be do now?

Egunkaria has to be published again. We have to keep on making new Eguneros in every region of the Basque Country. That's the way of doing it and that's why we have been attacked. And that is the reason why we should not give up! Among the people's reaction to the closing, apart from a clear support for the Basque language, I have seen that a social majority in favour of the Basque Country could become a political majority for those objectives. The Basque culture world has got a big responsibility in this project. The Basque language can hardly cope with a majority of PP-PSOE or PNV-PSOE. Look what's happening in Navarre, or in the North Basque Country!

Let's look a little bit further. We need other policies. We need a strong compromise that will push the Basque language forward. The current political status is not good for us. The Civil Guards and the Spanish National Court can close and destroy in a few minutes what it took several years to build. As soon as possible, we need sovereignty and the right to choose our language! If we don't put the Basque language at the top of the political agenda, we will have not future. Survival is not enough, the Basque language has to progress in all the areas of everyday life. In our case, in the medias.

What do you think about the reactions outside the Basque Country?

Egunkaria is a member of Midas (organization of medias in minority languages) and as a member of the board of directors, we had an appointment with Romano Prodi this month. He will heard about our case. I hope that other organizations, such as WAN, Ifra and journalists' organizations will comment on this attack on freedom of speech and freedom to use our own language.

Who is going to protect the Basques? If, as they say, we are Spanish, how on earth can Spain destroy something of its own? How can Europe tolerate an attack on a living heritage? "Which temperature needs Basque blood to boil?" wrote Sarri (Joseba Sarrionaindia, Basque poet) 20 years ago when he was in Herrera de la Mancha prison. It is about time to stop being afraid and to stand on. I know that governments need to be responsible and cautious, but to obbey Spain and Correo (pro Spanish media group, by far the most powerful in the Basque Country) has nothing to do with responsibility and caution. With the raid against Egunkaria, they have shown us that Euskaltzaindia (The Basque Language Academy) or the Basque Government could be next. They want us to be afraid, and we should be wise and overcome that fear. If Basque institutions obbey Spain, they will become more Spanish, and that's not their purpose. If we want to normalise our situation, it is necessary that Basque institutions make a deal to overcome the present political status and look for self-determination.

Basque rights can not be silenced in the name of coexistence! The issue is that all Basque people should fulfill the obligations towards the Basque language, even if that is not entirely legal nowadays!